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ABSTRACT

Asian students trying to learn to read English can best be assisted by receiving a strong oral language enrichment experience. An important part of language learning and of learning to read is experiential development; therefore, providing opportunities to experience the culture and geography of America can be an important part of teaching reading. Linguistic and affective development are also significant. A student who likes the people of the second language country and who senses positiveness, sensitivity, and support from the teacher is apt to be motivated to learn to read the language. Asian students especially encounter certain linguistic difficulties which hamper learning the language. Some of those difficulties are beginning consonants, consonant blends, certain final sounds, particular diagraphs such as "th" and "gh," changing pronunciations of the same vowel combination, and syntactical rules. (TJ)

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# READING FOR ASIAN STUDENTS

GRACE E. LEE

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From the earliest investigations in reading down to the current studies, researchers have not been able to shed much light on the processes involved for a person to become a fluent reader in his native language let alone in a second or foreign language. Many have agreed, however, that an understanding of experiential, cognitive, linguistic, and affective development could greatly assist reading teachers in planning effective instructional approaches.

"Language learning is a social phenomenon which cannot be dissociated from one's other life experiences." (1:189) Depending on the family's educational and social-economic background, the child's oral language facility and exposure to printed media, some students may have figured out at an early age that reading is a language/communication process. For others, learning to read in any language would mean first having to be provided with life experiences which form the necessary building blocks of knowledge and learning.

Experiential and Cognitive Development

In terms of verbal understanding, children learn more readily if they are provided with concrete experiences (3). When words accompany an object, activity, or experience, they become associated. Through a

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process similar to classical conditioning, conceptualization takes place and children come to understand that the words are names of specific objects or activities. When a child learns to use words in more than one language to denote the same thing, it is truly a dramatic step in the conceptualization process. However, should the child lack the basic experience, the words or labels mean nothing no matter which language is used. When an Asian student does not understand a certain English label, teachers are cautioned not to assume that it is merely a language problem. It may be due to an experiential deficiency.

A favorite example I have used with teachers to illustrate this point is to pretend that I am a student who lives in Africa, and they have to teach me about "snow" using any language. The geography could be changed to HongKong, Vietnam, or Singapore. The difficulty of the assignment remains because the problem here is not one of language but of concept development. When direct, first-hand experience is not readily available, vicarious experience is usually preferable to no experience at all. In other words, if a youngster cannot see a snowfall, or feel the softness of snowflakes as they kiss his cheeks, or examine the shapes of snowflakes under a microscope, or play in the snow, he is going to have great difficulty learning about snow. A suitable picture can be at least somewhat helpful to a student who lives in a warm climate and never sees snow.

Linguistic and Affective Development

In a recent visit to the Orient, I noticed that even in remote villages children would greet westerners with "Hello! Hello!" -- an

indication of having encountered Americans judging by their pronunciation and intonation. If that was their sole ability in speaking American English it could not have been more delightful; for in that brief greeting, the smiling faces and waving hands told us that their prior experience with Americans and American culture was a friendly one. These children would probably be eager to learn our language.

In California there are students of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indo-Chinese ancestry who may be recent immigrants in the United States, some of whom may be fluent in one or more languages in addition to their native language. Many have attained various degrees of oracy and literacy in English. Some students may have learned written translation from native language to English without having to express ideas orally; others may not have had the opportunity to practice English conversation. Some are able to understand English conversation auditorily if it is spoken slowly; still others may not be able to do so at all. On the other hand, many second, third, or fourth generation Asian Americans are fluent speakers of English. They become openly outraged when asked as to how long they have been in the United States, or when they are praised for their excellence in English mastery (6).

When being addressed in English, an immigrant student often appears flustered and does not answer for want of the proper label. The teacher, assuming that the student doesnot understand what is said, follows a common human tendency by repeating in a slower but louder voice with all the appertaining gestures. This, in turn, causes the student to be more distressed because now he is not only embarrassed,

but he also fears that he has angered the teacher. He learns to perceive his teacher's language and action as lacking in sensitivity, positiveness, and support.

For the immigrant students the task of learning English becomes monumental in that this is the language of the dominant society. In order to master all the other subjects which they need to learn, they must first become literate in English. They find that most school programs do not relate to their culture or history. Furthermore, few teachers can communicate with them in their language or share their culture. For some of these students, school may be their only contact with the larger society. They are not equipped to perform well on intelligence tests which are not culture-fair in a language they do not understand. Under such circumstances, the students are doomed to fail. Such failure becomes internalized by students as being "slow, retarded, or inferior," which eventually lead to lowered self-concept.

English as a Foreign Language

In learning to read English as a foreign language, the Asian student needs to acquire a different system of linguistic behavior which includes new speech sounds, pronunciations, vocabulary, semantics, syntax, as well as a set of graphemes which do not regularly correspond to the phonemes. All of this must be learned within the context of other kinds of behavior which denote the relationship and interaction between sender and receiver, content of the message, and value orientations and cultural traditions of both parties.

In order to facilitate this process, students can be helped to become aware of the differences between learning conditions of the two languages. First language learning was usually acquired under the "natural" course of growing up, and, therefore, the learner has also unconsciously acquired the values and attitudes of the first language users. In other words, a child usually has adopted the language and culture of his family and language community. He has learned the way people live their daily lives, how they interact, subjects of conversations, the performance of tasks associated with daily existence, holidays, customs, taboos, role expectations, role performances, interests, values, attitudes, etc. Within this context, communication between individuals was achieved via both the verbal and non-verbal means.

When verbal and non-verbal languages are used simultaneously, understanding is more easily facilitated. For printed symbols are devoid of affective cues available in conversations, and nonspeakers of English in attempting to master reading tasks have neither the English language skills equivalent to the language production of the author nor the ability to interpret the message which may be completely foreign to his experiences.

Language is part of culture. In order to attain competence in English, the learner needs to participate in its culture as well as learn the language. This necessitates the presence of a cultural and linguistic model within the classroom, namely the teacher, who could, and would, guide the learner toward a clear understanding of the

American culture of which classroom English is a part. By incorporating the affects inherent in a culture into the content of the written language, the reading process is made meaningful and relevant. This is best achieved when the teacher understands the two cultures and languages. The similarities and differences between the two could then be systematically and opportunistically introduced to the learner so that he could truly attain competence in the English language. Reading, as one of the language arts, needs to be taught and learned from such a perspective.

Some of the difficulties posed by English phonology for the Asian students are: (1) Beginning consonants, especially l/r confusion - Where the sound of r exists in Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, it is usually in the initial position and combined with l making a rl blend. It is common for Asian students to substitute one for the other. (2) Consonant blends are non-existent in most Asian languages. (3) Some final sounds in English are found to be even more difficult for Asian students than some of the beginning sounds, such as n or ng. (4) The th digraph does not exist in East Asian languages. This speech structure often is substituted with s or z sounds. (5) Four different sound representations of s, as in hiss, rose, sugar, and measure cause great confusion. (6) Irregular correspondence between ou diphthong as in bough, journey, though, through, rough, and the gh digraph in some of the same words. (7) Schwa sounds are usually attempted as short vowel sounds by Asian students, and the pronunciation of "America" becomes most amusing.

Modal verbs such as I can, I may, I will, and other abstractions create semantic difficulties in that they have no immediate physical referents to cue the student. Context becomes the major tool available for use, but the student must first gain comprehension. Of the four sources of information available to the reader - visual, orthographic, semantic, syntactic, the non-English speaking student who has no facility with the language has to rely heavily on the visual and orthographic. Not until he has internalized the rules of syntax, can the student organize the surface structure of printed language (grapheme) into the deep structure of semantic categories (meaning) (5). When the syntax of the reading material corresponds to the syntax of the student, and the vocabulary used is within his aural comprehension, only then does the content become comprehensible.

Implications for Teaching

In terms of psycholinguistic theory, an individual who has attained literacy in his native language would already have insights into the reading process so that he would be able to read English following a strong oral program in same. Research findings (2) also indicate that learning to read in one's native language appears to establish a firm foundation for success in second language reading and improves student self-concept. It has been my experience that the pre-literate pupil with broad background experiences and rich language interactions at home, and who has attained reading readiness, is able to learn to

read in either language. The student with limited experiential background, however, would first need enrichment and much oral language development prior to reading instruction in one language.

Following are some experiences which teachers can facilitate in order that Asian students can become successful in English reading. (1) Learn the English language - Provide abundant opportunities for listening activities which would help the student to become familiar with English speech sounds and sentence patterns. (2) Discriminate differences between cues - Use examples to demonstrate similarities and contrasts in terms of visual, acoustic, and semantic input. (3) Discover the rules of English syntax - Have student create his own sentence patterns by manipulating words until he resolves the mismatch between his structures and that of correct English. (4) After gaining comprehension, gradually increase speed of reading so as to further facilitate the processing of information, thus enabling the student to become a more fluent reader in English.

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